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ABSTRACT

New York City high school graduates, regardless of previous academic history, were eligible for admission to one of the free city colleges in September 1970. That free college costs a lot more money than free high school is part of the problem with which the new student population had to cope under Open Admissions. For some students the combination of financial and academic pressures, along with family resistance, made the open door a revolving door; for others obstacles were meant to be overcome. The adaptation of the institution to the person and the person to the institution is described, using material drawn from the author's counseling experience at Kingsborough Community College during the pre- and post-Open Admissions years from 1969 to the present. The author suggests that in the near future it will become necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of open admissions. The primary interia used will probably be percentages. (Author)

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The door opened at Kingsborough Community College in September, 1970 and in walked a freshman class that was not too far from the size of the entire student enrollment of the preceding year. They came, many of them, without the usual trappings of the college student. There were some housewives with children, who had earned high school equivalency diplomas, some students who had barely made it through high school, even in the least academically rigorous commercial or vocational programs, others who had spent several high school years in home-bound instruction because of mental or other illness. They were part of the new City University experiment in Open Admissions, a policy which guaranteed college admission to all New York City high school graduates regardless of their previous academic history.

The City University of New York (CUNY) consists today of 20 member units. In 1970 there were 8 community colleges and 7 four-year colleges, including the prestigious City College, where the whole thing started. During the days which now seem like ancient history, when students were vigorously engaged in changing the world, there arose at City College a demonstration led by the Black and Puerto-Rican Student Coalition which shut the college down for two weeks. Among the non-negotiable demands was one for minority group representation in the city colleges that was equal to their representation in the public schools of the city. A direct result of this confrontation was the order from the Board of Higher Education (BHE), the governing body of CUNY, that all member colleges were to make immediate preparation for admitting students they had formerly excluded.

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A year's worth of committee hours later, some 15,000 Open Admissions students swarmed onto the 15 CUNY campuses then in existence. They had been distributed among the community and senior colleges in accordance with a formula based on high school standing and grades, with the community colleges receiving the major proportion of the least academically promising students. The university defined an Open Admissions freshman in the senior colleges as one having a high school grade average below 80; in the community colleges, below 75.

Although the guidelines laid down by the Board had specified that each college provide sufficient remedial and supportive services sothat the new admissions policy does not "provide the illusion of an open door to higher education which in reality is only a revolving door, admitting everyone but leading to a high proportion of failure after one semester," the funds to match such a policy were nowhere in sight. For many of the new students it was 'sink or swim' (an appropriate image at Kingsborough, since the college is situated on a beach, surrounded on three sides by water). During the first few weeks of frustration, when students waited on long lines to register, a process frequently incomprehensible to seasoned college students, many sunk.

For those who survived registration, the problems had just begun. Finding the classes for which they had registered was the next hurdle. The main campus at Manhattan Beach resembled something between a ghost town and a migrant labor colony. Old, sea-washed buildings with broken windows which had served the previous tenant

at this site, the U.S. Military, were scattered around similar buildings in fresh coats of bright blue. Threaded among all these buildings were long strings of trailers, in which students had to find their classes. Sometimes they went from trailer to trailer to find a class which had been moved. In one case, a student came into my office in November -- I am a counselor at the college -- and the only classes he had been attending were Health Education and Gym. The gym was easy to find because it is housed in two gigantic bubbles.

The story of this particular student, Robert, can illustrate some of the problems, issues, successes and failures of Open Admissions. He came into my office in November not for help in finding his missing classes, but to see what had happened to his College Discovery money. College Discovery is a program that was initiated several years ago for the purpose of providing higher educational opportunity to small numbers of disadvantaged students. Students in the program were given stipends and other specialized assistance to ensure what the BHE said Open Admissions wanted to ensure, that the open door was not a revolving door. With Open Admissions, College Discovery is an anachronism and an inequity, since the same population is being served in both cases. It could, however, provide useful research data, if the Open Admissions results are compared with those of College Discovery, rather than with the college as a whole.

After their eligibility has been established, students are accepted into College Discovery on a random basis. I went checking

with Robert to find out why he hadn't received his money. After trudging through the mud to the trailer which housed the College Discovery office, I learned that he was not on the College Discovery roster either at this college or at any of the other colleges. I asked him what had led him to believe that he was a College Discovery student, and he referred to a letter he had received in response to his application. At my request, he brought the letter in. It read something like this, "Congratulations! You have been accepted at one of the colleges in the City University system. Unfortunately, all of the places in College Discovery have been filled or pre-empted...."

I saw Robert almost daily for the rest of the semester. In his first talks with me his eyes rarely met mine, and I wondered what it was I was dealing with. Was it drugs, severe emotional disturbance, gross retardation? Gradually it became apparent that Robert was a victim of limited mental ability and severe academic retardation. His reading comprehension was minimal, and he could not add two single digit figures. He had been graduated from a high school which was one the most turbulent in the city system. It had been closed down frequently during the period of this student's attendance. The courses he had passed in high school were special courses for persons with limited ability, and his high school diploma meant little more than that he had attended school regularly. Despite 13 years of so-called formal education, Robert lacked basic reading comprehension skills in his native language, and basic arithmetic skills. How could he possibly be a college student? It was a completely unsuitable option for this young man, and I was determined to help him find a more realistic alternative.

His determination, howev er, was more unyielding than mine. We went through the Department of Labor's listing of unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. By this time Robert's eyes were meeting mine, and they said, "No!" He wanted to go to college. The thought that he might be spending money for books and carfare for nothing did not deter him, despite the fact that his family subsisted on Welfare, and it must not have been easy to scrape together the $1.80 per day cost of carfare. Nor could I discourage him by indicating that at the very least it would take him four years to complete what other students completed in two. With single minded insistence, he refused to be diverted from his original purpose.

There followed days of trying to figure out the best curriculum to meet his needs. He had been registered in a Business Administration transfer program, a stepping stone to the Bachelor's degree at a four-year college, with traditional requirements in Mathematics, Science, History, and the like. It was obvious, even to Robert, that that was not for him.

Community colleges offer two basic types of curricula, career and transfer. The career programs prepare for occupational entry immediately upon completion of the two-year degree requirements. These include such fields as Automoti e Technology, Dental Hygiene, Graphic Arts, and other service occupational fields in which new semi-professional positions have been developed in recent years. Robert and I hit upon a new career program in Recreation Leadership being offered at Kingsborough as the one which would give him his

best chance of success. It interested him. He liked the idea of working in the recreation field. He had worked as a counselor in a summer recreation program, and enjoyed having young children come to him for help. And, the academic demands in this curriculum were not as overwhelming as those in other areas.

During the few weeks that remained before the end of the semester, there were many tests of Robert's motivation. He had to go through the laborious red tape of finding each one of the classes he had initially registered for in order to get the instructor's signature on an official withdrawal form. Before he could get their signatures, he had to complete his own part of the form. The simplest form took his most thorough concentration, necessitating a struggle with the dictionary in order to spell the work 'business' the way they had it instead of the way he was used to spelling it. He had no sooner completed this process than it was necessary to meet with the director of the Recreation leadership program to find out whether he would be accepted as a candidate, and to learn which courses to register for the following semester. Then there was the Financial Aid form, and although I helped him with the cost figures, I insisted that he add them up himself.

Part of the plan to see if Robert could make it as a college student involved his getting some reading instruction. The remedial services at the college were not geared to be helpful to one with such massive deficiency as Robert's. He agreed to try a reading improvement program offered at the central branch of the public library.

Although his anxiety about taking their placement examination caused him to miss his first two appointments, he kept the third.

The new semester began and Robert came to visit me less frequently. He stopped in one time to show me a copy of Malcolm X and his new library card. He was so proud of his library card that he went to his local library to apply for another, even though the first card was acceptable at all library branches. Robert completed his second semester at Kingsborough, with an index of 1.78.

Will he make it to the degree? That is still a long shot. During Robert's first year the college had a grading policy which prohibited failing grades. A student who was unable to pass a course received a Withdrawal grade, permitting him to repeat the course without penalty. As of this year the grading policy has been changed. There is every likelikhood that the college will no longer permit Robert, and all the Robert's, to proceed at their own pace. With C's and D's and a couple of F grades, it is likely that Robert will lose his matriculation and be unable to continue as a day student.

If Robert does fail to make it to the degree, will it have been a waste for him, for the college, for society? I think not. He has received some training, in a field of work which interests him. It should be possible for him to obtain employment in this field even if it is not at the same level as one who has completed the degree program. It happens to be a field where it may not be that important to know how to spell, add, or recite the facts of

American history. It will be of benefit to him and to society if he can function in work which will feed him and nourish him at the same time that one of society's needs for recreation workers is met.

It is a bit more difficult to answer the question of whether it will have been a waste for the college if Robert never attains graduation. Is a college, particularly a community college's contribution to be measured only by its graduates? Or has it performed an invaluable service when it offers partial vocational training, partial reversal of academic deprivation, partial exposure to ideas and concepts to all members of the community? This highly controversial issue may very well be resolved not by logic, but by money.

Robert is just one of the students who entered Kingsborough Community College in September 1970 and is still there. While the open door hasn't meant <u>open sesame,</u> it hasn't meant 'this way to the egress' either. Of that first class of 2,592 freshmen, 1,631 were still in attendance one year later, approximately 60%. The breakdown of this figure by high school averages suggests a significant relationship between retention at the college and initial entrance characteristics, as can be seen in Table 1.

High School Average	Fall 1970	Fall 1971	%
75 plus	580	423	73
70-74.9	837	564	67
below 70	1115	644	58

Table 1. Kingsborough Retention Data: 1970-1971

Figures can often conceal as much as they reveal. While the axiom, 'correlation does not mean causation' is drummed into every graduate student's head, there remains a tendency to deduce from the foregoing table that those who did poorly in high school lack the ability to succeed in college. When figures are presented in this manner, the general assumption is that the student is responsible for the failure rather than the institution. Let's take a closer look at what actually happened the first semester under Open Admissions.

The semester began with an incredibly chaotic registration. There was the usual confusion about which classes were open and which were closed, on top of abysmal ignorance on the part of everybody about which courses were an appropriate introduction to higher education. Further, it was the practice at this college to have two hours set aside in the middle of the day twice a week as club hours. No classes were scheduled during these four hours in order that students could be free to attend extra-curricular activities. This system may have worked fairly well when the student enrollment was under 3,000. With the nearly doubled student body, the club hours created an impossible situation, virtually requiring all students to remain on campus over the lunch hour, making the cafeteria look like a New York subway train during rush hour.

Straining of the cafeteria facilities was not the only consequence of the poor schedules many students were saddled with. Some ended up with a class from 8 to 9 in the morning, then an 8-hour break until their next class. Few of the Open Admissions students lived close enough to the college to be able to go home and come back again. Nor would they be able to afford the double carfare expenditure. The stretched-out schedules prevented students from working part time, and the school's limited financial aid budget was unable to compensate for the loss in income.

Adaptation to these difficulties took various forms. Several students took flight immediately, either withdrawing from the college completely or transferring to evening classes. Those who remained to fight waited on long lines to get their programs changed, frequently agreeing to take any course that was available at a suitable hour regardless of their interest or aptitude for the course. While they were busy rearranging classes, the first week of the semester went by. Rather than orientation, these students were treated to an intense dose of disorientation the first few weeks of the semester.

Having missed the first week, students set out belatedly to find out what was expected of them. One of the first shocks was that they were expected to buy their own books in each course. Since it was late, no used books were available, and the minimum textbook cost per course was $9. Never having anticipated going to college, and not knowing friends or relatives who had been college students, many were completely unaware that free college costs a good deal more than free high school. Neither cafeteria nor carfare costs are subsidized, and

neither books nor paper are handed out the way they were in high school. The college, later, made some arrangements to make textbooks available to students who couldn't afford to buy them, but for some it was too late.

Financial, academic and family pressure, either alone or in combination, drove the next wave of students out. The expensive textbooks were not just to be looked at, they needed to be read and digested. Tests which had been given before the students were graduated from high school indicated that 68% of the Kingsborough entering freshmen were in need of some remedial reading help; included among these were 14% in need of intensive remedial reading assistance. Textbook language has never been noted for its ease or simplicity of comprehension. Vaguely aware that they were not making contact with the course content, either in class or in the outside reading assignments, many students persisted until the first examination. Although failing course grades had been eliminated at the college, failing examination grades had not. Two young female Puerto Rican students who had wanted to become accountants came in to me with their first examination paper, brightly bedecked with zeros and F. Their families thought it was foolish for a girl to go to college. and they were subject to daily nagging about the amount of money they were wasting with their frivolity. If they had been able to receive financial aid in time, and if the appropriate remedial support had been available, these students might have been able to withstand the assorted pressures on them, but as it was, the F grade served as confirmation of the family's skepticism about the usefulness of college education. They decided that for the same amount of carfare they could be bringing in money to the family, without so much mental strain as they were presently

undergoing.

By the middle of October, just as things were beginning to settle down somewhat, there came the two-week pre-election holiday. This had come about in response to the strong reaction to the Kent State killings in May. A summer had intervened, however, and there were few students who understood or appreciated its significance. Later, when I called in students who had not earned any credits in the fall semester, one after another told me, "I never came back after the recess." What did they do instead? Some of them worked, others wandered around the country or around the city.

A significant number of open admissions students were those who had "goofed off" during high school, and still weren't ready to take advantage of a second chance. Because of the way open admissions originated, many people thought that the greatest influx of students would be Black and Puerto Rican. One of the guidelines had asked for the ethnic integration of CUNY colleges. In actuality, the greatest numerical increase occurred among white students, at Kingsborough and at all of the other City University colleges. In the university at large, although there was an increase of 4680 Black and Puerto Rican freshmen from 1969 to 1970, there were 9500 more white freshmen in the same period. At Kingsborough the open admissions entering class had almost 2000 white students and fewer than 600 Black and Puerto Rican students.

The sharpest difference in the student body before and after open admissions is not in ethnic composition. In many respects the students who come to Kingsborough under open admissions are not that

significantly different from the ones who came before. There were students who couldn't read or didn't like to before open admissions. There were students who had to find time to study in between batt' ng with a drug addicted brother and a defeated mother. There were married students with children. There were 75-year old grandparents who decided it was not too late to get a college education. There were playboys (of both sexes) who were in college to collect a deceased parent's Social Security allotment, or because they had tried working and didn't like it, or to avoid c draft, or because it had never occurred to them that there was anything else to do. There were students who had been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons, and students who were walking around with untreated emotional problems. There were students on welfare and students with too much money. There were drug takers and drug dealers. Overprotected and underprotected. The community colleges always served this kind of student. The principal difference under open admissions is that there are more of them, more of every kind of problem that can afflict students at this age level; social, psychological, economic, academic, existential.

Before open admissions the counseling faculty was able to keep a reasonably close watch on the personal growth and development of the entire student body, available for crisis counseling when a parent died or was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown or when emergency funds were needed, or tutoring or therapy or social agency involvement or help with feelings of inadequacy, a broken heart, total despair. They even had some time to help prod students into broadening their horizons, thinking more imaginatively about their futures. Instructional

faculty members were able to experience comparable satisfaction in turning students on to their particular disciplines. It is no longer possible to reach the entire student body, and it is necessary for middle class professionals to learn to be satisfied with less than 100% success. This is a difficult concept, and there is considerable grumbling among older faculty members about the impossibility of teaching psychology or history or anthropology to students who can't read. Many of the senior faculty members find it easier to blame the student than to change their teaching style. But one of the serendipitous side effects of open admissions has been the introduction to the campus of large quantities of new faculty members. In general, these are young, enthusiastic professionals, who are eager to 'prove' themselves. In the process, they tend to perceive any failures as their responsibility rather than the student's. Their presence has radically altered the nature of the institution, and that might very well be the most significant contribution of the open admissions experiment.

There have been other contributions to the college made by open admissions...new course offerings, new career programs, modifications of archaic requirements, independent study courses...a great ferment of activity in many directions.

Pretty soon the time will come to evaluate the effectiveness of open admissions. I don't know the criteria that will be used, but I suspect that there will be heavy emphasis on numbers: not just numbers, but percentages. What proportion of open admissions entrants made it to the proper exit? Such figures may completely obscure the facts. The facts are that at Kingsborough Community College 1200 students who

might otherwise have been walking the streets looking for a job, overcame an impressive collection of obstacles and gained a year's exposure to college, that the challenge of educating these students for a place in society has helped the institution remain faithful to its purpose as a community college. Another fact may very well be that society is too myopic to recognize the bargain this represents. No one has figured out yet how many revolving doors it takes to equal one revolution.